

LOS ANGELES, CALIF.
TIMES

M. 768,503
S. 1. 094,990
JAN 28 1965

Congressmen Study Watchdogging the CIA

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It reads like an old script, but this time there may be a different ending. There should be.

There long has been a credibility gap not only between the Central Intelligence Agency and a large number in Congress, but also between the many in Congress who don't know what the CIA is up to and the few who claim they do.

In both the House and Senate there have been repeated efforts to close that gap by changing the system by which Congress oversees the super-secret agency's activities.

The principal suggestion through the years has been to establish a joint House-Senate committee on the CIA, patterned after the highly-respected Joint Committee on Atomic Energy.

Now a new strategy with the same ultimate objective is being tried—a proposal that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee investigate the CIA's impact on America's foreign policy.

Just because the name is Central Intelligence Agency and it lives in a world of spies, coups d'etat and who knows what else, this does not make it an untouchable.

The CIA is not the Russian KGB. The two do similar work, but they exist in different environments. The CIA is—and should be—answerable to a society of free people whose representatives in Congress are charged under the Constitution with the duty to make certain that the massive authority of

government is not employed improperly or inefficiently.

Because the CIA is so secret, so big, so powerful—and so vital—is all the more reason for Congress to take special care that it is going as far as it prudently can in auditing the agency.

One Bay of Pigs catastrophe in a lifetime is one too many, no matter the number and magnitude of the CIA's unheralded successes. And that disaster is one that surfaced—and rightfully so—despite all the top secret labels. One can't help wondering what other blunders may lie buried somewhere.

The Bay of Pigs undertaking raises another point: there are secrets and there are secrets. Government officials, being human, have a natural proclivity to overclassify.

In any case, those pressing for closer, more formal supervision of the CIA by Congress are quite conscious of the requirement for secrecy.

Sen. Eugene J. McCarthy (D-Minn.), a prime mover for reform for over a decade, told the Senate in 1963:

"... As espionage and counterespionage have become more pervasive and their techniques more subtle, the need for secrecy has, if anything, increased."

But McCarthy added: "Nevertheless, I do not think it right that the Congress... should be kept so largely ignorant of what is going on in the 'back alleys.'"

Secretary of State Dean Rusk had spoken of the

CIA as an agency that operates in the "dark back alleys" of the globe.)

The history of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy provides a persuasive argument for adapting that method of congressional oversight to the CIA.

For 20 years the committee has been privy to the nation's most sensitive atomic secrets, including the military aspects. Yet, as far as is known, not a single secret has been compromised.

The committee operates under strict, formal procedures. The law requires it to be kept "currently and

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fully informed" by the Atomic Energy Commission and others on worldwide developments in the nuclear field—and it is.

It takes testimony on a regular, frequent basis, the witnesses coming primarily from the Atomic Energy Commission, but including also the Defense Department and the CIA. The committee is aided invaluable by a full-time staff of professionals.

Guards, automatic door locks and a huge walk-in safe that contains all the files are part of the elaborate security precautions. Every staff member—even clerks—must have a "Q" clearance, the highest in the atomic field.

What congressional supervision there is of the CIA is largely done by subcommittees of the Appropriations and Armed Services Committees in the House and Senate.

But in the context of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, these subcommittees operate informally and are briefed irregularly.

How thorough a job

these subcommittees do is difficult for an outsider to judge. What is clear is that while the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy seems to have the confidence of all in Congress, the CIA subcommittees do not.

And that lack of confidence on the part of many in the present method of overseeing the CIA represents a nagging problem of some import for the agency.

Switching to the joint committee method might be doing the CIA a favor, if only because it will



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silence much of the congressional agitation that has persisted for so long.

But that's not all of the problem. The Appropriations and Armed Services Committees have an obvious concern with CIA operations. Equally obvious, however, is that the CIA affects diplomacy and foreign policy.

It would seem, in fact, that the Foreign Relations Committees logically could claim priority rights. Yet those committees have been virtually shut out.

Some have suggested that the Foreign Relations committees establish their own CIA subcommittees.

If this happens, it will mean six CIA subcommittees in Congress, three in each house.

Would not a professionally-staffed joint committee—comprised of the leadership of the Foreign Relations, Appropriations and Armed Services committees—provide more efficient oversight, and with less risk of a security breach?